

Octavia E. Butler

Telling My Stories

Library, West Hall
April 8–August 7, 2017



THE HUNTINGTON
Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens

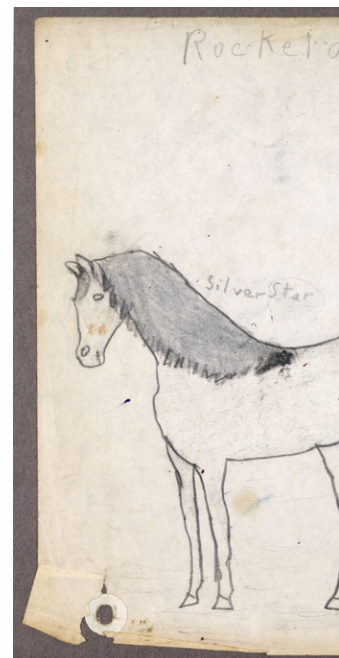


Octavia E. Butler (1947–2006) was a pioneer, a trailblazing storyteller who brought her voice—the voice of a woman of color—to science fiction.

Her fresh approach to what some might consider a nonliterary genre framed serious and often controversial topics through a literary lens. Tackling subjects such as power, race, gender, sexuality, religion, economic and social status, the environment, and humanity, Butler combined the tropes of science fiction and fantasy with a tightly rendered and entertaining prose style. These are *her* stories. Her deeply developed characters contend with extraordinary situations, revealing the best and worst of the human species.

As the first African American woman writer in the field of science fiction, Butler faced pressures and challenges from inside and outside her community. Tired of science fiction stories featuring only white male heroes, Butler took action. “I can write my own stories and I can write myself in,” as she liked to say, and in the process she created a new identity as a black woman role model and an award-winning author. She published 12 novels and a volume of short stories and essays before her untimely passing in 2006. “Octavia E. Butler: Telling My Stories” draws on the author’s manuscripts, correspondence, papers, and photographs, bequeathed to The Huntington, to explore the life and works of this remarkable woman.

Octavia Estelle Butler was born in Pasadena, Calif., on June 22, 1947. Butler discovered writing at an early age, finding that this activity suited her shy nature, her strict Baptist upbringing, and her intellectual curiosity. Her first stories featured horses, followed by romance. But it was the B movie “Devil Girl from Mars” (1954) that inspired Butler to write science fiction, certain that she could write a better story than the one unfolding on the screen. Writing, and especially writing science fiction, was not considered a suitable career choice for a young African American woman in the late 1960s and early ’70s. Octavia’s mother envisioned a practical career for her daughter, such as social work or office work, so that—unlike her own domestic occupation—her daughter could sit down. Butler dreamed only of being a writer, from the first moment she realized such a profession existed. First through the Open Door Program for minority writers sponsored by the Writer’s Guild of America, West, and then through the Clarion Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers’ Workshop, Butler sought the means to hone her craft and put herself on a path toward professional authorship.



* AN ANNOUNCEMENT AND AN INVITATION

Ms. OCTAVIA E. BUTLER
PRIZE-WINNING SCIENCE FICTION AUTHOR
WILL SPEAK AT YORK COLLEGE
ON FRIDAY, DECEMBER 10TH
IN ROOM 1M06 AT 1:00 P.M.

Ms. BUTLER HAS WON THE HIGHEST RECOGNITION GIVEN SCIENCE FICTION—THE HUGO AND NEBULA AWARDS. HER XENOGLOSSIA SERIES—AND EARLIER NOVELS LIKE “WILD SEED” AND “KINDRED”—HAVE WON HER A LARGE AND ADMIRING AUDIENCE, UNITING THOSE WHO LIKE THE SCIENCE FICTION, AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND FEMINIST WRITERS.

HER TENTH NOVEL, “PARABLE OF THE SOWER,” HAS JUST BEEN PUBLISHED BY FOUR WALLS EIGHT WINDOWS, AND COPIES WILL BE ON SALE FOR FAN WANT AUTOGRAPHS.

EVERYONE INVITED!

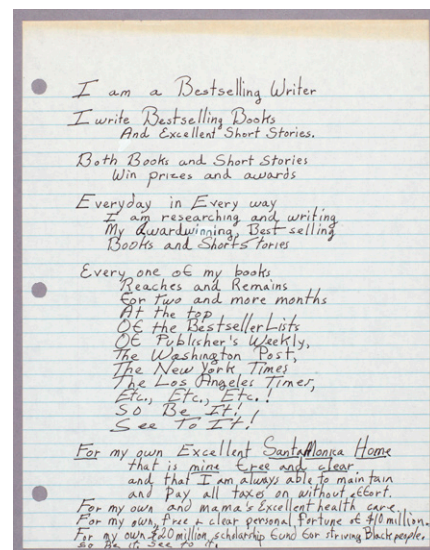
A black and white photograph of a woman's face, looking upwards. The woman has dark skin and her hair is pulled back. She is looking towards the top left of the frame. The image is partially obscured by text on the right side.

Butler often wrote in the wee hours of the morning while making ends meet with a hodgepodge of day jobs. She sold her first novel, *Patternmaster* (1976), to Doubleday in 1975, quickly followed by *Mind of My Mind* (1977) and *Survivor* (1978). All three novels take place in the extended psionic world of the Patternists, superhumans with paranormal mental powers that Butler had begun creating as a child. The novels address one of Butler's most common themes: power. The questions of who has power, who does not, how one can acquire power, and how power should be used—all of these pervade Butler's work.

Coming of age during the Civil Rights movement, Butler astutely observed the generation gap between black youth, especially those in militant movements, and their seemingly meek elders. Butler wrote *Kindred* (1979) to address the difficulties and horrors faced by slaves and to help modern blacks deeply feel the historical context of challenge and sacrifice that was part of their heritage. In her own words, "I wanted to reach people emotionally in a way that history tends not to."

She researched the science in her fiction meticulously, from the behavior of a virus, to hospital procedures, to the geography of a setting. She developed a love for libraries at a young age, in the Peter Pan Room of Pasadena's Central Library. As an adult, she gathered information from books, articles, interviews, travel, and personal experience to ground her narratives in reality. Writing provided Butler with an outlet to face her fears, address her faults, and imagine a better future.

"We human beings are so much more alike than different."



Octavia E. Butler, motivational notes,
ca. 1975

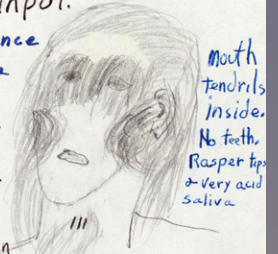


Clarion Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers' Workshop attendees with Harlan Ellison (seated), 1970. © Jay Kay Klein.

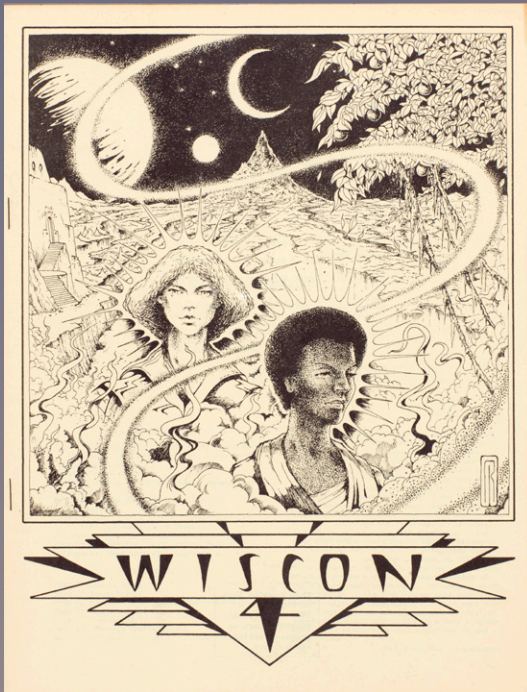
Sensory Tendrils around ears, eyes, mouth and breathing slits on throat <closed during speech> These are tough fibers that protect delicate openings and intensify sensory input.

The appearance is more of a mask than of hairiness.

Tendrils can come together and appear to be slightly darker, unbroken flesh, or they can wave free or clutch at objects, examining them microscopically



Octavia E. Butler, notes on the Oankali, ca. 1985.



Wiscon 4 program, 1980.

PASSION
Raiders *Mad dog* *Temptation*
 She is ever building
Acquiring — Scavenging
Trading, Seducing, *Loss of loved one*
Assembling. Building Acorn
Building Earthseed. Passion
Falls, Burns,

Octavia E. Butler, notes for Parable of the Talents, ca. 1996.

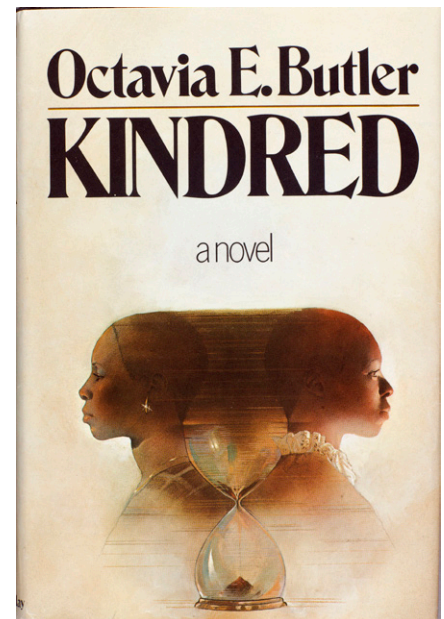
Disease and medicine perpetually fascinated Butler. Bizarre symptoms of real illnesses became fodder for a variety of fictional diseases featured in her work. *Clay's Ark* (1984) chronicles the attempt to contain an interstellar plague. The haunting short story "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" (1987) questions the efficacy of pharmaceuticals and the new horrors humankind might unintentionally create through them.

Being a woman writer in a male-dominated genre lent Butler's work a unique voice. Sometimes the difference was as simple as fleshing out male and female characters equally, or as dramatic as women resolving their problems not through violence but through such powerful traits as flexibility, nurturing, and sensitivity.

Butler traveled to the Amazon to research her Xenogenesis novels—*Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989). Xenogenesis, literally meaning strange or foreign birth, refers to the creation of offspring permanently unlike the parents. Each book in the series follows the joint evolution of post-apocalyptic humans and the Oankali, an interstellar gene-trading alien race that "rescues" humanity from extinction. The trilogy incorporates biology, genetics, medicine, sexuality, and race to explore ideas about gender, polyamory, family, social justice, and identity.

A self-proclaimed news junkie, Butler absorbed the pressing issues of the late 1980s and early 1990s with foreboding. She often used "If this goes on..." as a prompt for her writing.

"The one thing that I and my main characters never do when contemplating the future is to give up hope."



Octavia E. Butler, *Kindred* (Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y.: 1979). First edition.

Concerned about climate change, politics, pharmaceuticals, and social issues, she wove her apprehensions into a riveting near-future story. In *Parable of the Sower* and its sequel, *Parable of the Talents*, heroine Lauren Oya Olamina creates a new religion to navigate societal breakdown. Centered on the concept of change—"All that you touch, you Change. All that you Change, Changes you"—Olamina ultimately posits a destiny among the stars as a stabilizing goal for her displaced followers. Realistic rather than utopian, the Parable books cast an unflinching eye on humanity at its best and worst.

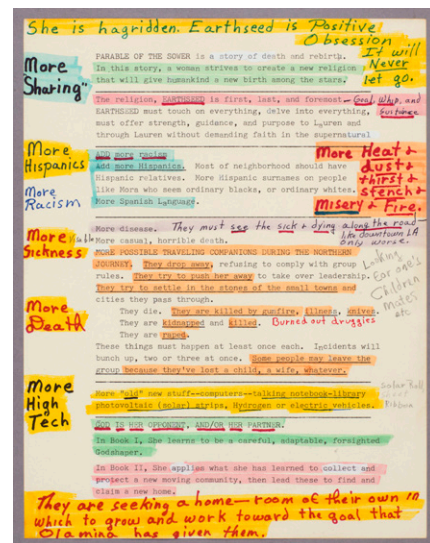
For Butler, writing was first and foremost about telling a good story. Challenged by writer's block and self-doubt, she kept at it, finding in renewed efforts the ultimate path to success.

Butler's relatable, flawed, passionate characters help us question ourselves and see our place in the world with more clarity. As viscerally relevant today as they were when she first wrote them, her stories continue to inspire readers and a generation of new writers, women of color and beyond—anyone who, like Butler, has the courage to imagine a different world.

NATALIE RUSSELL

Assistant Curator of Literary Collections

*"Why aren't there more SF Black writers?
There aren't because there aren't.
What we don't see, we assume can't be.
What a destructive assumption."*



Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* outline and notes, ca. 1989.

RELATED PROGRAMS

Curator Tour

Octavia E. Butler: Telling My Stories
June 7 (Wednesday) 4:30–5:30 p.m.

Join curator Natalie Russell for a private tour of the exhibition.

Members: \$15 | Non Members: \$20

Registration: huntington.org/calendar

Conference

Octavia E. Butler Studies: Convergence of an Expanding Field
June 23 (Friday) 8:30 a.m.–5 p.m.
Rothenberg Hall

Experts studying the life and work of Octavia E. Butler explore the expansive ways in which her writing and research foster a deeper understanding of the past, present, and possible futures.

\$25 | Registration: huntington.org/butlerstudies



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Above photo: Octavia E. Butler, ca. 1986. © Patti Perret.

Front cover: Octavia E. Butler, ca. 1988. © Miriam Berkley;
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please contact photographer Miriam Berkley
(miriamberkley.com).